

30 SECONDS



JMMPEDRÓS



30 SECONDS



30 SEGUNDOS

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

A man stops at a red light. Thirty seconds—that's all it should take.

But for him, time begins to unravel.

Trapped inside his car while the world moves on, each second stretches into an unbearable eternity. As traffic lights remain red and reality starts to fracture, his perception of time—and his sanity—slowly collapse.

30 Seconds is a dark, hypnotic descent into obsession, waiting, and mental disintegration, exploring how a single moment can become a prison—and how easily the mind can break when time refuses to move.

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PROLOGUE

This is the story of an ordinary citizen who uses his car to go to work every single day.

A clear sign of poor civic behavior, since he refuses to use public transportation—those glorious breeding grounds for germs and diseases—though, truth be told, we’re all exposed to them one way or another. From childhood, we’re bombarded with infections of all kinds, supposedly to help us build immunity, despite our mothers’ desperate wish to dress us in space suits just to send us to school.

After this brief clarification, we dive into the difficulties faced by the man I chose for this story.

Why a man, you may ask. Simple answer: I am one, and it’s easier to tell this story from the perspective of a fellow bastard. Still, I haven’t formally introduced him yet.

His name doesn’t matter. For the sake of the story, we’ll call him **Juan**. He’s painfully average—no remarkable features, no distinguishing traits. He could be anyone. He could be you. I generalize on purpose to make identification easier.

I’ve decided to tell this story in the first person. That way, Juan gets a voice, a personality, something readers might cling to while everything else falls apart.

Red is the color of danger, prohibition, blood. It evokes violence, crime, humanitarian organizations... but for drivers, it’s simply the color that pisses us off the most.

Juan drives the same route every day—a route carefully designed by traffic authorities over the years with the sole intention of fucking with drivers. There are more traffic lights than intersections in this so-called city. They claim these lights regulate traffic. I say they exist to slow us down and remind us who’s in charge.

Juan never makes it through more than two green lights in a row. Never. This has been meticulously engineered by some sadistic traffic engineer who probably masturbates to congestion reports. We’re the drivers, the idiots paying road taxes just to crawl through the city, obedient, submissive, swallowing every rule no matter how inconvenient.

The story takes place in one of those massive commuter cities where leaving home is an odyssey and coming back—when everyone has the same brilliant idea—is pure torture. The result? Hours of unpaid overtime every week. Thirty seconds per traffic light. Minutes at every bottleneck. I’ve spared myself the math. I won’t calculate the time wasted, the adrenaline burned, the antacids swallowed, the chamomile tea brewed to calm a stomach on the brink of explosion—or the permanent state of anxiety.

And just when you think it’s over—when you’ve survived the traffic lights, crosswalks, 30 km/h speed limits—you meet the final boss: some kid on a high-powered electric scooter. Faster, nimbler, smug. Another reminder that you’re losing.

By the time you finally make it home, you feel like a war veteran. Battle-scarred. Victorious, somehow.

You open the door, and if you dare make a sound, a synchronized chorus rises from the living room:

“Shhh! Shhh! SHHH!”

Your children and your wife—squatters glued to the TV. That’s when the bitter taste hits your mouth. Bile. A full day’s worth.

I’ll only tell you about one of those days. A routine day.

Picture Juan waking up to the shriek of an alarm clock—a wedding gift from someone who’s probably still laughing. Beside him, the person he sleeps with: a stranger. Whatever love once lived there is long gone.

He gets up in the dark, lit only by streetlight bleeding through the blinds. His bladder is about to burst. He searches for the goddamn slippers that are never where he left them. He turns on the hot water and, as always, the heater refuses to cooperate: scalding or freezing—pick one.

Shaving comes next. No new razor. Never. They’re all used or already in the trash.

He gets dressed in whatever clothes he laid out the night before—not because he likes them, but because they’re tolerable enough for the drive. Keys. Wallet. Papers. Check.

He doesn’t wake his wife. Not out of kindness—out of fear. Fear of a fight. Fear of another stretch of mandatory sexual abstinence. He breathes. Tries to calm down.

His face looks like it lost a fight with broken glass. He reheats yesterday’s coffee and eats muffins left open all night—hard as rocks. After chewing through them like gravel, he takes the dog out.

The damn dog. Putting the collar on is professional wrestling. The dog always wins.

Dragged to the elevator. Outside at last. The dog spends fifteen minutes sniffing every corner where another animal has pissed, then takes a shit right on the sidewalk. Juan picks it up. The bag breaks. Of course it does.

Back upstairs. Dog returned to his throne. Water and food bowls refilled. Only then can Juan go down to the garage and get into the car he’s still paying off six years later.

He walks into the dim garage toward his battered, aging vehicle—an ungrateful machine that’s given him more problems than freedom.

New scratches on the side. Courtesy of the neighbor who never opens his door carefully. Juan politely asks him to wait before opening the passenger door next time. The neighbor looks at him like he’s an alien.

Furious, Juan nearly crashes into the exit barrier, fumbling for the cursed access card buried somewhere in his wallet.

He finally gets out. On the wall, an orange blinking warning light alerts sleepy pedestrians. Luckily, it’s early—no pedestrians hurt. A stray cat isn’t so lucky. Seven lives gone in an instant. Juan never notices.

He crawls along the avenue at 30 km/h and approaches the first traffic light. It looks enormous. A giant. Like Don Quixote mistaking windmills for monsters.

Except Juan has no horse.

No squire.

And no illusions left.

SECOND 01

Motherfucker. Same shit every day. In all these years, I've never once caught this light on green. The day it turns green, I'll buy a lottery ticket. It'll be that rare. I'll probably win the jackpot.

As usual, I retreat into my thoughts, hoping time will move faster.
Big mistake. It only makes it worse.

I stare at the pedestrian signal—green—and, for some stupid reason, try to activate one of my imaginary superpowers. The one everyone wants: controlling traffic lights with your mind. Obviously, I fail. Disappointed, I look at nothing in particular.

Then—like a kick to the groin—an explosive noise snaps me out of it.

I turn my head to the right.

And there he is.

The devil himself, reincarnated as a kid in a neon-yellow sports car. Probably bought by daddy, along with a promise not to kill himself—or anyone else.

He looks drunk. Or worse. Window down, arm hanging out like he's leaning on the bar of some shithole dive. The son of a bitch is blasting music so loud my windows vibrate.

Nobody says a word.

I roll up my window in self-defense, but it's useless. The club is inside my car now. I shoot him a murderous look. He keeps nodding to the beat, unfazed.

I'm tempted to scream. Or get out and do something stupid. But then reality kicks in. What if he's crazy? What if he pulls a knife? A gun? You hear about it every day.

I shrink back into my seat and repeat a lesson drilled into me as a kid:

Graveyards are full of brave men.

I won't be the one to change this shitty world.

The exhaust roar. The smell of burnt oil. The sun beating down on the roof like it's personal. No AC—never had it. It was an “extra.” Biggest regret of my life.

How long has it been? Feels like forever.

I dig through the glove compartment, hoping to find that cigarette I swore I'd quit. Today's the perfect excuse.

I light it .

SECOND 02

The music keeps pounding, setting the rhythm of my miserable life.

Between my trembling fingers is that cursed paper-and-tobacco cylinder. With every drag, the disgust I feel toward myself grows in perfect sync with the hatred I feel for the herd of pedestrians crossing the street with the lazy arrogance of people who have nowhere to be. They stroll past me like they're mocking me on purpose.

My face tightens. I can feel new wrinkles forming. Hair falling out. I scratch my scalp raw. My hands don't know where to rest. My feet twitch.

My nails. God—my fingers are chewed down to the flesh.

And then—of course—it gets worse.

To my left, a high-powered motorcycle zigzags between the line of cars patiently waiting for the green. Bikes, scooters, motorcycles—same story. They always cut to the front. Motorcycles blast off when the light changes, but bicycles and scooters? They clog the lane until the next light. You never get rid of them. You spend the whole time tense, alert, terrified of running one of them over and ruining your life.

The biker revs the engine like he wants everyone to admire his precious toy. He's got a passenger.

I look at her.

No—I devour her with my eyes.

For a brief moment, she's the only thing that makes this hell tolerable. Of course, nothing is perfect. Her youth and elegance clash violently with the look of pure hostility she shoots back at me. She caught me. Felt my gaze crawling up the back of her neck.

I snap back to reality. Coward mode engaged. I look away, pretending to search for something—anything.

Now I'm the one being watched.

I feel hunted. Exposed.

I sneak a glance. They're still staring.

Danger.

The biker says something to her, kills the engine, gets off the bike, and walks straight toward my car. His knuckles tap against my window. To me, they sound like hammer blows.

What do I do?

Simple. Shit myself internally. Pretend I don't hear him. Pray to the god of cowards.

He knocks again.

I have no choice. I lower the window.

A thousand ways to end up with a black eye flash through my mind.

Instead, a soft scent reaches my nose.

Not a fist—perfume.

Very politely, he asks for directions.

I answer, barely. He thanks me with a condescending smile and gives me a mock military salute before walking away. His companion laughs openly, almost choking with it.

I want to die right there.

I pray nothing leaks through my pants and stains the seat. Light upholstery. That kind of stain would scandalize anyone.

SECOND 03

Have you ever shit your pants?

Of course you have. The warm liquid seeping everywhere. The moment the first wave escapes, the rest—long suppressed—seize the opportunity. There's no stopping it. Your face changes color. Your body betrays you completely.

That's exactly what's happening when I notice a police cruiser pull up next to the motorcycle. The officer looks at me. Suspicious. And honestly? After clenching like this, my face probably looks like a drunk's.

The radio crackles. An emergency. Suddenly the siren screams—an animal in heat. The cars part like the Red Sea. The patrol car vanishes.

Relief.

I finish emptying everything I had left inside. I'm sitting on a cushion of shit. The stench is unbearable—even for me. I don't dare open the window.

Music still blasting. Heat suffocating. Shit glued to my ass. Pedestrians pinching their noses. The biker laughing.

Something snaps.

I enter shock.

I see—or think I see—a luxury hotel men's room. A servant waits for me, calls me by name, offers clean towels and cologne. He leads me to a stall, helps me undress, cleans me with professional tenderness. No judgment. No disgust. Soft music plays. Drinks. Snacks. A massage. Fresh clothes, pressed and perfect.

Then—

A knock on the window.

I wake up.

A ragged man stands there holding a water bottle and a filthy squeegee. I look at my windshield in horror. He's made it worse. Much worse. I scream at him. He spits and keeps scrubbing.

I lower the window and hand him some coins. He looks at them, looks at me, and gives me the finger.

As a tip, he kicks my door.

Rage floods me. I consider getting out, beating him senseless—but something inside me warns me off. I'm covered in shit, and men like him have nothing to lose.

He mocks me, laughs, disappears into the crowd, feeding the amusement of others.

I sit there. Humiliated. Small.

I close the door. Breathe. Try to focus.

The light is still red.

with shaking fingers.

SECOND 04

Thank God—the deafening music finally stops.

But no. Of course not. Another one starts immediately, and I don't know which is worse: the club garbage or this.

I look around in panic, trying to locate the source of this new atrocity.

There they are.

A gypsy couple. She walks with a small begging bowl. He pushes a cart carrying a drum kit, a massive speaker hooked to an amplifier, which in turn is wired to a keyboard. Like a discount one-man-band apocalypse.

He grabs the microphone like a famous singer—almost eats it. Clears his throat between coughs and spit. Then it begins.

Crushing drums. Deafening bass. Overblown trumpets. Saxophones pushed past sanity. Screeching Spanish guitars. Maracas. And above all of it, his voice—surfing the noise like a lunatic riding a wave.

It makes me physically sick.

But the kid in the sports car, the biker, the other drivers—they're all moving to the rhythm. Rumbas. Tangos. Pasodobles. Lowest-common-denominator greatest hits. They clap after every song.

I stuff paper towels into my ears.

While everyone's distracted, I seize the moment. I slide my pants down a bit and try to clean myself as best I can.

That's when I sense a presence.

Right at the window.

The gypsy woman. Bowl in hand.

There I am—pants down, ass full of shit, paper towels smeared with filth. My face must look like a world-class idiot, the same frozen expression worn by victims of old con games.

She taps the glass. No shock. No judgment. Just calm. Benevolent.

She gestures—she understands.

Desperate, I unlock the door. She gets in quickly, finishes lowering my pants. She grabs paper towels, wets them with water from a bottle I swear I did not have in the car. She cleans me with such care and tenderness that not even my mother could have done better.

No words. Just dignity.

She pulls my pants back up, carefully layering paper on the seat to avoid stains. I hand her a twenty-euro bill. She looks at it, crosses herself, and leaves with a look of deep pity.

As she goes, cheerful and unbothered, you'd never guess she begs out of need.

I'm left stunned.

Ashamed.

Ashamed of myself. Of my thoughts. Of my hatred.

I sink into the seat.

I wish I could disappear.

SECOND 05

The gypsies are gone. But they leave something behind.
A strange stillness.
The noise is gone. All of it.
I step out of the car—and so does everyone else. It's like we suddenly realize we have neighbors. Cars sit silent. No engines. No fumes. The air feels cleaner.
People start talking. Singing. Children laugh so loudly it infects the adults.
The light is still red.
But everyone is thinking green.
I hug strangers. They hug me back, crying. Night falls. Fires are lit. Food appears from trunks. Motorcyclists, cyclists, pedestrians—all share.
Nobody works.
Nobody worries.
Life becomes one endless party.
Nothing lasts.
Supplies run out. Songs fade. Conversations dry up. Hunger takes over. Those with food hide it, eat in secret. Those without roam at night, hunting the careless.
No one is safe.
The strong eat the weak. Literally.
Now I stay locked inside my car. Sometimes I hear desperate knocking, but I know if I step out, I'll become someone's dinner.
It's worse than before. Before, we hated each other—but we were useful. We worked. We earned. We consumed. The wheel turned.
Now it's broken.
The city looks like a holocaust. Fires everywhere. Starving hordes wander aimlessly. Machines rot. People lie in the sun like lizards, feeding on light.
Anarchy reigns.
And still—
the traffic light stands.
Untouched.
Majestic.
Governing above all living things.
No one passes.
That is the last rule.

SECOND 06

The knocking is so violent I finally look up.

Everything is gone.

At the window stands a giant—over six feet tall—gesturing impatiently. I’m still dazed.

He knocks again. Harder.

The sun flashes off his uniform buttons.

Authority.

He scolds me gently. Asks if I’m okay. Says my behavior isn’t normal. The heat, he understands—but the neighbors were alarmed.

He studies me, searching for a reason to arrest me or send the men in white coats.

I talk. About anything. News. Sports. My marriage. I hit the right notes. We connect.

Eventually, he relaxes. Winks. Sits beside me.

Somehow, he pulls out a flask—metallic, silver-looking—and offers it to me.

I hesitate.

Everyone is still waiting for the green.

He insists.

I drink.

It burns.

Heat spreads through my body. He drinks too. His face reddens. His tongue loosens. He starts crying. Tells me his miserable life.

I listen.

Afraid.

His gun hangs at his belt.

He notices my fear.Laughs. Assures me it’s unloaded. Removes the bullets to prove it.

Then—smiling—he puts one back.

He spins the chamber.

Points the gun at me.

I freeze.

Click.

Nothing.

He laughs. Says it’s his turn.

The explosion is deafening.

Blood sprays my face.

SECOND 07

How is this possible?

No one heard a thing. I look around, waiting for shock, screams, chaos—anything. Nothing. Everything is exactly the same. Did a cop just blow his brains out and nobody reacts?

I get out of the car, soaked in blood, and run back and forth trying to get someone's attention.

Indifference.

Blank faces.

Engines idling.

—Of course nobody heard anything.

—What the fuck?

—What are you surprised about?

—You shot yourself!

—That's what *you* say.

—How is that possible?

—Look at me. Still alive. Still kicking. Ha.

The “resurrected” cop jumps up, flailing his arms, mocking my panic. Everything feels brutally logical, and it never once occurs to me that all of this might be madness—heatstroke, hallucination, lack of air.

Then he raises his gun and starts firing at random.

His targets fall like rag dolls.

No one runs.

No one intervenes.

No one calls for help.

The bodies hit the ground...

...and then stand back up, returning calmly to their original positions.

The cop laughs. Laughs at my stupid face. Slaps my shoulder like a buddy enjoying a joke at my expense.

This has to be purgatory.

Not heaven.

Not hell.

A waiting room.

A place to pay for unpaid tickets, unspoken resentments, small cowardices.

I was raised Catholic.

Even the good ones sin five times before breakfast.

Maybe this is my chance to repent.

To cleanse myself.

To earn my way out.

I cling to that idea.

SECOND 08

It starts snowing.

Snow always calms me.

It's a rare thing. Children appear, throwing snowballs, building grotesque little snowmen out of discarded clothes. I watch it all like a movie.

Then the screams.

One of the children is gone.

Parents rush in. Authorities arrive. A search is organized. Everyone helps—friends, family, strangers. Hours pass.

Nothing.

The police interrogate the kids. Each has a different story.

A giant bird.

A shadow.

A hand from the sky.

The parents are destroyed.

Cars are searched. Dogs sniff under trucks. We're treated like suspects. I don't blame them. We were closest. We should have seen something.

Fear paralyzes us.

The officers appeal to our humanity. The Good Samaritan. Shared responsibility.

We look at each other.

Silently, we agree on one thing.

Will helping bring the child back?

Will it let us cross if we help?

No one answers.

The light is still red.

SECOND 09

I get back into my car.
I think of my childhood.
A filthy street.
A boy my age.
His mother dead.
His imagination limitless.
One rainy day, hiding under a stairwell, he told me a story that still crawls back into my mind.
A moonless night.
Darkness swallowing the room.
His bedroom door opens.
He thinks it's his father—coming for a goodnight kiss.
Someone sits on his bed.
He looks up.
It's a boy.
Sitting cross-legged.
No eyes.
Just empty black sockets.
Terror paralyzes him.
The boy opens a shoebox.
Black as pitch.
Curiosity overrides fear. He demands the box. The boy refuses.
Blink—
And he's gone.
This happens night after night.
The father blames nightmares. Too much dinner. Too much imagination.
They move.
First night: peace.
Second night: the boy returns.
The father snaps. Demands to know what the boy wants.
The child answers calmly:
"He says he's happy now. He found his mother."
"What mother?" the father asks, horrified.
"Ours, Dad. Both of ours."
The truth comes out eventually. Gas explosion. Lies. Suspicion. Shame.
The father, cornered, swallows two full bottles of sleeping pills.
Some say the dead brother wasn't really his son.
I don't know.
I just know the light is still red.

SECOND 10

White and red flashes slice through my rear window like lightning, stabbing the mirror and blinding me. As if that weren't enough, my ears are assaulted by the shriek of a siren announcing the arrival of an emergency vehicle in desperate need of passage.

Nobody moves.

The traffic light outranks everyone—even the king himself. Everyone knows it. Everyone obeys.

Tired of the noise, the driver kills the siren and the lights. He steps out, a trembling cigarette hanging from the corner of his oversized mouth. He walks up and taps timidly on my window.

"Got a light?"

"Sure," I say, oddly friendly.

"You been waiting long for the green?" he asks, hopeful.

"Not really. Ten seconds," I answer with contempt.

"A whole world," he says, ironic but clearly craving conversation.

"But weren't you in a hurry?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"Depends on what you mean by hurry, my good man," he replies smugly.

"Well, the flashing lights and the howling siren kind of give it away."

"Don't worry about that. The lights and noise are just to impress the passenger I'm taking to the hospital. Nothing special."

"To the hospital? Then it *is* urgent."

"Relax. He's not in a hurry anymore. I can assure you."

"Because he's dead?" I ask, mockingly respectful.

"He is. She isn't."

"She?"

"Young people are always in a rush," he says, amused, as if I should understand.

"Her?" I press.

He smiles. "Forty years younger. Makes sense to make sure your husband is *very* dead. There's a lot at stake."

The ambulance door opens.

And suddenly, this gray, insignificant day turns into a blessed spring morning.

The corpse clearly enjoyed every second with that goddess who sways like one of the finest whores ever to grace this hell we call Earth.

SECOND 11

Once the heiress disembarks, the driver ignores me and goes off to satisfy the widow's whims. I'm oddly grateful for the conversation—it forces reflection. Some say we're here to learn. Apparently, aside from the dead husband, I'm the only one who learned anything today.

The day resumes its dull course.

I notice three children in the car to my right. One look at their exhausted father tells me everything: the ex-wife dumped them on him. She's probably out with friends who worship soccer, drinking until they swear they'll never drink again.

He looks at me like a beaten dog begging for meat.

I shrug.

He chose the prison called family. He was exiled.

I feel superior.

In my fantasy, I stayed single—no kids, no pets, no nephews. Free.

I won't deny it: loneliness eats me alive like cancer. But watching him trapped with three kids in a car, I feel proud of myself.

How long will that illusion last?

The dashboard betrays me.

Photos. Smiling faces.

"Daddy, come home soon."

My grin collapses into that universal expression of someone who just tripped and hopes no one saw.

Tierra, trágame.

I sink into the seat, peeking like a coward to watch the grotesque scene unfold. Mine or his—I'm not sure.

Suddenly, I'm discovered.

The kids stop tormenting him and point at me.

He looks.

Horror.

He gets out.

Nearly seven feet tall.

He strides toward me and knocks confidently on my window.

I hide, then slowly raise my head.

Should I lower the window? Run them all over?

I invoke every saint that ever existed and press the button.

As the glass lowers, I straighten myself with the last scraps of dignity I own.

"Sir," he says calmly, "my children are asking if you have any water."

"Pardon?" I reply, sounding like a complete idiot.

SECOND 12

After tearing the car apart and finally satisfying the children, I stare at the traffic light.

That red—blood red—grows until it fills everything. I become transfixed, like a moth to a fatal flame.

Then I rise.

Gravity lets go.

I float out through the window, looking down from above. Below me, cars are ants. Pedestrians hurry under the green walking man, forever trapped in his little square—just like us.

But I fly.

I'm going to cross.

Even if it's from the air.

A force slams me back.

Again.

And again.

"Where do you think you're going, sir?" a voice asks—from everywhere and nowhere.

"Where else?" I shout. "Across the light."

"You can't. It's red."

"And who's going to stop me?"

"You," the voice answers flatly.

"Me?" I ask, shocked.

"Yes. You."

"Fine. Then I contradict myself."

"Try again," it says smugly.

I bounce like a rubber ball.

Then a sound drills into my skull. Relentless. Metallic.

I wake with a bitter taste and a pounding head.

I'm back in my seat.

Red everywhere.

Jackhammers.

Construction starts *now*. Concrete being devoured. Compressors screaming.

I jump out, ready to fight these windmills.

The man operating the jackhammer looks at me without stopping.

I turn around and walk away.

I may be an idiot—

but I'm no Quixote.

SECOND 13

When I crawl back into the car, I realize I'm no longer alone.

There's a young woman inside. Rough-looking. I don't know how long she's been there, and I don't know which worries me more: what she might have seen, or how the hell she got in without me noticing.

"Please, sir... it's an emergency," she says, with the face of an abandoned puppy.

I stay quiet. One look at her tells me she's been hurt. Then she panics, looks out the window, spots something I can't see, and ducks down, trying to make herself invisible.

Someone is running between the cars.

A big man. Thick neck. Mean face. He bangs on windows, forcing people out of their vehicles. Nobody resists. Who would?

Now I understand her fear.

We lock eyes. She doesn't speak, but she doesn't need to.

I grab the small travel blanket I keep in the trunk. I gesture quickly. She crawls under my legs, covering herself. Just in time.

The brute reaches my car and signals for me to get out.

I refuse.

In a sudden, ridiculous burst of chivalry, I decide to defend the honor of my damsel. He insists. We stare at each other.

Inside, I'm liquid fear.

Outside, I put on my best serial-killer stare.

To my own surprise—and to that of my ancestors—he only peers through the window and moves on, cursing his luck.

The danger passes.

She emerges from between my legs, blows her nose, straightens her torn clothes, trying to look human again.

She looks at me with pure gratitude.

Then she moves closer.

Too close.

She smells like sweat and panic. Her hand slides along my leg. Higher. Toward my crotch.

I don't like this.

The knight inside me refuses payment in sexual favors. It feels wrong. Disrespectful.

I gently stop her. She laughs.

"I'm impressed," she says with a wink.

I say nothing.

I feel good.

I did something right.

"At least a hug, then?" she insists.

We embrace. Long. Warm.

She leaves, swaying as she walks.

Then the brute reappears.
“Idiot! You let her get away!” he shouts.
“She robbed me!”
I pat my pockets.
My wallet.

SECOND 14

Now I'm more miserable than ever.

I think about replacing my documents. IDs. Cards. Everything we carry so the authorities know who we are.

I convince myself she only wanted the cash. She'll probably toss the paperwork. Maybe some kind soul will mail it back. Or someone I know will find it and return it.

I turn on the radio, desperate for anything that isn't the same songs and endless ads.

Station after station. Fingers raw.

Finally—something different.

A talk show. Everyone talking. Nobody listening.

Then I hear a voice.

My name.

My real name.

It's impossible.

But I know that voice.

My mother.

She keeps calling me, urgently. I argue with her through the radio, shouting over the chaos. Suddenly, silence.

"Everyone shut up," someone says. "He can hear us."

The radio goes dead.

Then my mother again:

"Cross, son. Cross."

"I can't, Mom!" I scream. "The light is red!"

Someone interrupts.

"Sir, please let us work."

Then another voice rises above the rest:

"Your mother is dead!"

They all repeat it.

I freeze.

Do I know that?

My mother cuts in again:

"Don't listen. Cross. Cross."

"Mom!" I scream, smashing my fist into the dashboard.

I rip the radio out like a weed and throw it out the window, Olympic hammer-throw style.

My hands are bleeding.

But it's my heart that hurts.

SECOND 15

It hits me.
The voice wasn't hers.
And maybe—just maybe—she *is* dead.
Grief crashes over me. Guilt. I wasn't there when she needed me. I broke my promise
not to institutionalize her. Not to abandon her.
The weight pounds inside me like a stampede of elephants.
In the distance, I see a traffic officer approaching, holding something.
I pray it's not what I think.
It is.
My radio.
A hole in the dashboard. Two hundred euros gone.
I stare past the traffic light, wishing for a meteor, a bomb, any cataclysm to drag us
all to hell.
Nobody notices me.
Everyone is hypnotized by red.
My body tightens. My mind rots with dark thoughts.
I'm trapped in a cage of metal and concrete, surrounded by people living in a different reality.
How long before I explode?
I breathe.
I focus on the engine. The sound. The air on my face.
A small victory.
I'm alive.
Every second matters.
I decide—briefly—not to waste them on hatred.

SECOND 16

Something shifts.

At first it's subtle—almost polite. The world loses definition, like an old photograph left too long in the sun. The edges blur. The noise dulls. I feel detached from my body, as if I'm watching myself from a few inches behind my eyes.

The traffic light pulses.

Red.

Red.

Red.

Each pulse feels heavier than the last, like it's pressing directly against my chest.

I notice my breathing is shallow. Fast. My hands grip the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles ache. I try to loosen them.

I can't.

Around me, the other drivers sit perfectly still. Not bored. Not angry.

Empty.

They stare straight ahead, eyes fixed, mouths slightly open.

Statues.

Wax figures waiting to melt.

I scream.

Nothing.

My voice doesn't exist anymore.

That's when I realize the silence isn't outside.

It's inside me.

SECOND 17

Time fractures.

I don't know how long I've been sitting there—seconds, hours, years. The concept stops making sense. The clock on the dashboard mocks me. The second hand moves, but nothing changes.

I remember my childhood bedroom.

The smell of detergent.

My mother's voice calling me for dinner.

Then—my wedding day.

Then—the first time I realized I was alone even while lying next to someone.

Images stack on top of each other, crushing me.

I feel old.

Ancient.

Fossilized in this seat.

The red light doesn't control traffic anymore.

It controls **me**.

I understand it now.

It's not a signal.

It's a sentence.

SECOND 18

Pain arrives late.

It starts in my jaw. Then my temples. Then behind my eyes. A slow, expanding pressure, like something trying to hatch inside my skull.

I taste metal.

Blood.

I must be biting my tongue. I don't remember doing it.

I laugh.

A dry, broken sound escapes my throat. I don't recognize it as mine, but it comes from me.

I press my forehead against the steering wheel.

For a moment—a brief, merciful moment—I think I might pass out.

But the light stays red.

And consciousness, cruel as always, refuses to let go.

SECOND 19

I start to understand something terrible.
The light isn't broken.
It isn't malfunctioning.
It isn't delayed.
It's doing exactly what it's meant to do.
Everyone else seems to accept it. Their faces are calm now. Peaceful. Almost relieved. As if waiting here—forever—has freed them from having to choose, to move, to fail.
I envy them.
I try to open the door.
My hand reaches for the handle, but my arm won't obey. It's like my body belongs to someone else now—leased out, revoked.
Panic crawls up my spine.
I pound the steering wheel.
Nothing.
The red light reflects on the windshield, staining everything.
Even my thoughts feel red.

SECOND 20

A memory surfaces, sharp and uninvited.

My mother, sitting at the kitchen table, staring into a cup of cold coffee. Saying nothing. Saying everything.

I remember how I avoided her eyes. How I told myself I'd come back later.

There's always a later.

Until there isn't.

My chest tightens. I gasp for air that tastes stale, recycled, exhausted. The car feels smaller. The city presses in on me like a coffin slowly lowering.

I whisper an apology.

I don't know to whom.

The light doesn't care.

SECOND 21

Something breaks.

Not outside.

Inside.

I stop fighting.

The tension drains from my shoulders. My grip loosens. My breathing slows.

A strange calm washes over me, warm and numb.

This must be what surrender feels like.

I stare straight ahead, just like the others. My mouth hangs slightly open. My eyes glaze.

For the first time, the waiting doesn't hurt.

The red light hums softly.

Almost kindly.

And for a fleeting second, I think:

Maybe this is enough.

SECOND 22

The calm doesn't last.

It never does.

A tremor runs through the ground—or maybe through me. The red light flickers, not changing, just reminding me it *can*. That it *won't*.

I notice something new.

No one is blinking.

Not a single driver. Not a pedestrian. Eyes wide open, dry, fixed. As if blinking were an act of rebellion.

I force myself to blink.

It hurts.

My eyes burn, but I feel strangely proud. I've done something. Anything.

The light answers with silence.

SECOND 23

Sound begins to peel away.

Engines fade first. Then voices. Then even my own breathing becomes theoretical—
something I assume is happening but can't quite hear.

What remains is a low hum.

Constant.

Everywhere.

The hum of waiting.

I realize with a jolt that if the light turned green now, I wouldn't know what to do.
My foot wouldn't remember the pedal. My hands wouldn't remember how to steer.

Waiting has rewritten me.

The red light hasn't stopped time.

It has trained us.

SECOND 24

Faces start to change.

Not dramatically. Subtly. The way meat changes when it's left out too long.

Expressions slacken. Features soften, then sag.

We're all decomposing in real time.

A child in the back seat of a nearby car begins to cry. A thin, exhausted sound.

The mother doesn't turn around.

Doesn't react.

The crying stops.

No one notices.

The light remains red.

SECOND 25

I think about movement.

Walking.

Running.

Falling.

Dancing.

All the things bodies are supposed to do.

My legs feel hypothetical. My spine feels ornamental. I'm a head attached to memories, bolted to a seat.

A question surfaces, simple and lethal:

If it turned green... would I go?

I don't answer it.

SECOND 26

The city decays.
Not with explosions or fires—those would be merciful.
It decays bureaucratically.
Slowly.
Officially.
Asphalt cracks. Buildings sag. Paint peels. Signage fades.
The traffic light is pristine.
Untouched.
Maintained.
Someone, somewhere, is taking care of it.
That thought terrifies me more than anything else.

SECOND 27

I laugh again.
This time it's quiet. Controlled. Almost polite.
Of course.
Of course this is how it ends.
Not with speed.
Not with impact.
Not with drama.
With compliance.
I finally understand why no one crosses.
Crossing would mean admitting this was a choice.

SECOND 28

My reflection in the windshield startles me.

I don't recognize it.

My face looks older than it should. Hollowed out. As if the waiting has eaten layers I didn't know I had.

My eyes look obedient.

That's the worst part.

SECOND 29

Something inside me screams one last time.
It's faint. Weak. Like a muscle that hasn't been used in years.
Move.
I tighten my foot. Just a little.
The engine responds with a whisper.
Hope flares—tiny, ridiculous.
The light stays red.
The scream dies.

SECOND 30

I stop measuring time.
Seconds dissolve. Numbers become decorative.
There is only this moment, stretched infinitely thin.
The red light fills my vision completely now. There is nothing else. No city. No car.
No past.
Just red.
I understand.
The light was never meant to change.
It was meant to be obeyed.

EPILOGUE

They will find me like this.
Still seated.
Hands on the wheel.
Eyes open.
The engine cold.
They'll say I must have had a heart attack. Or a stroke. Or a breakdown. They'll sh-
rug. Write a report. Clear the intersection.
The light will remain.
Someone else will stop.
And wait.
And learn.

Fin.